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ABSTRACT

Steps taken by a university to develop a successful and meaningful inservice teacher education program for public school teachers are described. Development of this program involves cooperative effort from several different sources. Faculty members, as part of their teaching load, are assigned to educational support teams that help school districts identify needs and acquire resources. Faculty members also work with professional development centers in intermediate school districts. In addition, field-based, needs-based, inservice-oriented, master degree programs are developed cooperatively with participating teachers, university instructors, and school district personnel. The major emphasis in this program planning is on active participation at all stages of planning on the part of the school teachers who will benefit from the inservice courses designed for the program. (JD)

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CLIENT-CENTERED APPROACH TO INSERVICE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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The Program of Education and Professional Development (EPD) and the Research, Evaluation, Development, Experimentation (R.E.D.E.) Center of the College of Education at Western Michigan University participate in development of inservice education primarily for three audiences. Faculty members, as part of their teaching load, are assigned to Educational Support Teams which help school districts identify needs and acquire resources, and usually on a consultant basis, faculty members also work with Professional Development Centers of intermediate school districts. In addition, field-based, needs-based, inservice-oriented master degree programs are developed cooperatively with participating teachers, university instructors, and school district personnel.

Assumptions

Essentially, variations of the same needs assessment activities (based on TEC Needs Assessment Package, S. Freedman, B. Huckaby, and B. James, 1975) are applied with each of the three audiences and are based on the following assumptions. Most of the assumptions may appear to be simplistic, but lack of attention to them may interefere with the usefulness of collected data.

1. The primary purpose of conducting needs assessment activities is to facilitate the effectiveness of inservice activity that will follow, not to answer research questions. There seems to be a tendency in the academic community to equate data collection and research, and sometimes experimental design criteria are applied to assessment activities which restrict the potential of those activities to promote positive change in educational systems.

2. An inservice program (defined in the broadest sense) is more likely to be effective if participants (i.e. teachers) support the program, and efforts to acquire that support should begin in the earliest stages of decision making.

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3. At least three factors influence the liklihood that teachers will support an inservice program:

   a. The extent to which teachers feel programs address their needs.
   b. The extent to which teachers are involved in decision making.
   c. The extent to which teachers feel that their perceptions have been heard and addressed.

   Teachers will probably be dissatisfied with the opportunity to choose what they want from a predetermined "menu" of training activities. They usually want to participate in deciding what is on the menu.

4. Perceptions of teachers represent valid data. For several reasons, it is inappropriate to discount teachers' perceptions of their needs. Many teachers have cited disrespect for their ideas as a source of disappointment with needs assessment efforts. It is a mistake to assume that the rest of us know more about practitioners' needs than they do. Even if we did, which is very doubtful, people behave in relation to their perceptions and often give only superficial support to programs which do not account for those perceptions.

5. Teachers should be the primary source of data, but other groups also have valid perceptions. Other groups view classrooms and teaching activitiy from different perspectives, and their input can be valuable. In fact, the success of resulting programs may be dependent on their support. Program decisions should probably involve at least the following groups:

   a. Those who will be held responsible for decisions (e.g. central administrators).
   b. Those who will be required to implement decisions (e.g. curriculum coordinators, university teacher educators).
   c. Those who will be affected by decisions (e.g. teachers).
   d. Those with a special interest in decisions (e.g. university personnel, parents, students).
   e. Those with special expertise in the domain of the decision (e.g. content specialists, instructional designers).

6. Data collection should involve a variety of processes. Processes and instruments invariably reflect the biases of designers, and each restricts the kinds of responses which can be expected.

7. Teachers tend to be more enthusiastic about needs assessment if the relationship between assessment activities and program delivery is visible. This assumption, and the next five, are addressed in a description of a target school approach, which follows the list of assumptions.

8. Teachers tend to feel school-specific needs more intensely than district-wide needs.

9. Those who plan inservice activities are often responsible for training at least at a district-wide level.

10. Resources for delivering inservice training are usually limited, i.e., insufficient.

11. Development of programs that adequately address needs usually involves a substantial investment of resources.

12. It usually costs less, in money and time, to implement or disseminate programs than it does to develop them.

13. An inservice program must simultaneously address current and future needs. If a school district attends to problems only as they become apparent, resulting programs may lack overall direction and involve treatment of symptoms. However, districts cannot afford to ignore current problems which are seriously interfering with school operations.

14. The purpose of needs assessment is not to determine what is wanted in general, but what is needed to achieve specified goals.

15. There are probably thousands of needs which could appropriately be addressed in inservice training, and needs assessment is primarily a process for better defining and prioritizing needs.

Target School Approach

Typically, a school district either fairly equally disperses usually limited resources for inservice training to all of its schools or implements a program which seems to have a general appeal, but may not adequately meet the needs felt strongly at any specific school. Since effective development is usually costly, it is doubtful that equally divided resources would be sufficient to meet the needs of most schools. This problem can be addressed with the target school approach, in which schools are identified on the basis of criteria relevent to a school district, such as representativeness or obvious extreme need for services. Resources are funneled into

development of inservice programs for target schools, and since the programs may address needs of other schools and since dissemination is usually less expensive than development, the resulting products often can be offered to interested teachers from other schools. During needs assessment activities at target schools, a commitment is made that at least one of the top five needs identified by teachers will be addressed in inservice. With the target school approach, sufficient resources may be available to develop programs with a reasonable chance to successfully meet both school-specific and district-wide needs. Of course, it is usually appropriate to reserve some resources for additional programs developed on the basis of data collected district-wide.

Assessment Model

The model used at Western Michigan University has two phases. An annual phase represents the core of the model and involves an extensive group analysis of goals and needs in target schools. A triennial phase involves collection and prioritization of needs by several educational groups. That data is added to target school data for use in district-wide planning. It is usually unnecessary, and probably ineffective, to apply data collection steps in the triennial phase more often than about every third year.

Both phases have the same major components. In the first component, sets of needs are derived, from target schools in the annual phase and several sources (to be described) in the triennial phase. In the second component, all derived needs are categorized on a master list, and in the third component, representatives of groups which participate in the derivation stage rank order needs on the master list. Finally, all data

collected in derivation and prioritization components are used to develop an inservice plan.

Annual Phase Derivation Component

The needs derivation component of the annual (target school) phase involves five steps. First, participants affirm or revise existing goals and reach consensus on a rank order of goals. Second, for each goal the forces helping or hindering goal accomplishment are listed, and in the third step participants decide which of the forces they should try to influence in an effort to reach the goal. After forces are prioritized, objectives are written which reflect what would be happening if participants were satisfied with the degree of influence the forces were having on the goals. For example, if a positive force were "some teachers have diagnostic skills" and participants wanted to strengthen that force, they might write an objective describing how many more teachers should have diagnostic skills or how much more effective those skills should be. In the final step, participants determine what would be needed to accomplish objectives and how it should be delivered.

Triennial Phase Derivation Component

As mentioned, data collected as part of the triennial phase is used, with annual phase data, for planning district-wide inservice planning. In that phase, initial needs are derived from four sources:

1. District administrators apply a variation of the force-field analysis process used in target schools, but they attempt to identify district-wide rather than school-specific needs.

2. A Future Directions Committee, composed of district administrators, university faculty members, teachers, and consultants employ another variation of a force-field analysis process in an effort to predict future needs of the district.

3. A large sample of district teachers use the Generic Skills Inventory (GSI) developed by Lou Carey (1975) to indicate which of fifty-two generic teaching skills (applicable across grades and subject matter) they want addressed in inservice training.

4. Measurement and instructional specialists analyze pupil scores from standardized tests and attempt to determine what teaching improvements would be needed to raise scores.

When assessment activities are conducted, participants are usually aked to use brief Likert scales and small group debriefing sessions to evaluate results and processes. Thus far, responses have been very positive and have included requests for additional similiar activities. An interesting side effect of assessment activities, especially those involving verbal interaction, is that, regardless of the nature of needs derived, participants find the process itself valuable for improving communications and making teachers aware that many needs perceived as personal are often grade- or school-wide needs.

References

1. Carey, L. M. Generic Skills Inventory. Tallahassee, Florida: Teacher Education Projects, 1975.

2. Freedman, S. P., Huckaby, B. A., and James, B.N. Needs Assessment Package. Tallahassee, Florida: Teacher Education Projects, 1975.